

Parish Council Report for April 2020

Cllr Graham Bridgman (West Berkshire Council, Burghfield and Mortimer Ward)

If a month was a very short time in a pandemic (March Report), two months is not much longer!

West Berkshire Council

Council Meetings

Extraordinary Meeting

Following the implementation of the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panels) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 that I referred to in last month's report, there was an Extraordinary Council Meeting on 29 April to agree procedures for holding remote council meetings.

Members agreed the protocols by which WBC will continue to hold public meetings in compliance with the Regulations, including live streaming. Public questions previously asked orally at meetings have been replaced by questions in writing, and oral representations have been replaced by representations in writing – because of the concern that otherwise decisions might be challenged for technical reasons beyond the council's control.

I have circulated our new Remote Meetings Protocol and Zoom Meetings Guidance to parish chairmen and clerks, but if anyone wants copies please let me know.

Zoom Meetings are becoming a way of life!

Annual Meeting

The Annual Meeting of council, when the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of Council are elected and memberships of the various Council Committees, etc, are decided, will take place remotely (and be broadcast via YouTube – the details will be on the agenda page on the WBC website) on 12 May.

Additional Funding for addressing the Covid-19 pandemic

Within the next few weeks, the Council will receive a proportion of an extra £1.6bn Government funding which has been earmarked for Local Authorities to help respond to the impact of the Coronavirus within our communities.

The new funding is further to that received in March and will assist in covering further costs that the Council is facing due to the virus in the short term and, will enable the Council to continue to provide vital services to support residents and (in particular) to meet additional costs in Adult Social Care and to support our external care providers.

Community Support Hub

The Community Support Hub (CSH) established in response to the Covid-19 pandemic is providing parish and town councils with a weekly data update on their activities. The CSH is contactable seven days a week and is co-ordinating resident requests for support with volunteers able to provide the most appropriate assistance. You can follow the activities of the Hub on their Facebook page *West Berkshire Community Support Hub Group* and contact them on 01635 503579, or email them at westberksbct@westberks.gov.uk.

Food distribution for shielded and self-isolating

WBC's partner, Spotlight UK, alongside council officers is co-ordinating the weekly distribution of food from its base at Newbury Rugby Club. Last week 130 food packages were delivered by volunteers from across the district.

Community Cash Float

A float is available to community volunteer groups to allow for the reimbursement of a volunteer's costs when they are shopping for those that are self-isolating but do not have enough cash to cover those shopping costs – once the individual pays them for the shopping they then return the float money to the community group. Thus the fund will always return to balance, and will be repaid to the Council at the end of this crisis period.

For groups who have registered with the Community Support Hub and who require such a float, please contact the Hub on 01635 503579 to make an application.

Care Homes

Regrettably I've now been on the front page of the Newbury Weekly News twice in two weeks with regard to deaths in care homes.

West Berkshire Council has a higher number of its own care homes than many local authorities and we are extremely saddened to have lost some of our residents – up to the end of April there had been 17 deaths of which four were certified as a result of Covid-19, and we had another 15 residents who had either been confirmed as having Covid or were symptomatic.

I am hugely grateful to the staff in our care homes who are looking after our residents and liaising with families.

Personal Protective Equipment

I know that adequate supplies of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for carers is a concern nationally. At the present time we have the supplies we need, and are keeping this under constant review.

I have also been greatly encouraged to see those in communities who are utilising their skills to make scrubs for our health workers where their use is appropriate.

Education

Primary School Allocations

The primary school allocation was announced last week with 98% of children being allocated a school in one of their preferences. This means that from the 1,749 applications for primary school admissions received by West Berkshire Council this year, 1,710 children were offered a place at one of their three preferred schools with 89% of those receiving their first choice.

Libraries

Despite the libraries being closed since March, to minimise risks to users, staff and volunteers, the overall levels of items borrowed has gone up by 6.8% in the 12 month period to March. This is largely due to loans of almost 90,000 e-books, e-audiobooks, e-magazines and e-newspapers – an increase of a staggering 127.39%. The Library service offers its members access to free resources from BorrowBox, OverDrive, RBDigital and PressReader, which was launched in May 2019.

Customers who are not already a member of the library, can join online giving them free and instant access to the e-library. For details visit www.westberks.gov.uk/libraries.

Waste Services

Waste Collection

Our colleagues at Veolia are continuing to collect household waste and recycling on the usual collection day. To mitigate staff shortages, collection teams are starting at 06:00 so we are seeking to spread the message to residents to have their bins out earlier than normal.

Bulky Waste Service

Residents will be pleased to hear that our bulky waste collections from kerbside, that were temporarily suspended, have been restarted - from outside properties only and excluding white goods.

There's a charge for collecting bulky waste, and all collections need to be booked in advance by calling the Customer Services secure payment line on: 0330 131 9742. We're unable to arrange collections via email. We are running the standard collection service only, where items are left outside your home for collection - for up to five items, the cost overall is £45. Where possible please leave item(s) out for collection in the front garden. [You can read more about our bulky waste collection on our website.](#)

Household Waste Recycling Centres

We are discussing how and when we will be in a position to re-open the HWRC at Newtown Road and Padworth. In West Berkshire we have direct access to the anaerobic digester which means we have been able to continue to collect green waste, unlike some authorities who had suspended this service.

Other streams of household waste disposal continues to be more complex without compromising social distancing guidelines both at the centres and onward processing. We do not wish to give a conflicting message with regards to essential travel guidance and swamping our HWRC's with high volumes of people and traffic.

Fly-Tipping

West Berkshire was recently voted as one of the 50 best places to live in the UK in 2020. Please use our [online service to report instances of fly-tipping](#) and provide us with as much detail as you can. We are continuing to monitor our environment and take enforcement action against perpetrators of fly-tipping.

Other issues arising from Covid-19

Support for local businesses and residents

Business Rates

Our Business Rates Team has now been in contact with over 954 West Berkshire businesses eligible for Government Grants. So far £12.2 million in grant funding has been given to support them.

All businesses must be contacted individually, which is causing some delays, but the team is working as quickly as they can and we have issued grants to over 99% of businesses who have returned their forms to us.

[Find out more about the support available to local businesses.](#)

Council Tax Holidays

A reminder that, for individuals in receipt of Council Tax Support, a grant of up to £150 has been applied to the resident's account – they do not need to apply for this.

For those who have experienced a sudden drop in income as a result of the COVID-19 consequences on their employment income a Council Tax 'holiday' (can be discussed by contacting our Local Taxation team. More information can be found on our website: <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/article/36859>).

LEP Task Force

WBC has joined a task force established by the Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership to support businesses in Berkshire who are struggling with the impact of Covid-19.

The Task Force includes key stakeholders including the Thames Valley Berkshire Business Growth Hub, Thames Valley Chambers of Commerce, Federation of Small Businesses, Institute of Directors, Confederation of British Industry and the six Berkshire Local Authorities. It will be used to ensure that

businesses are kept up to date with developments, have access to finance available, and are provided with as much support as possible.

Covid-19 and Viral Load

This information piece from Holly Jenkins, a WBC Public Health Registrar, in a recent Coronavirus bulletin may be of interest.

We know for some diseases that the dose of virus a person is exposed to will directly correlate with how severe the disease is. A good example of this is influenza. Virus particles hijack living cells and force them to make more virus copies. We don't yet know how many particles of the SARS-CoV-2 (the virus causing COVID-19 disease) it takes to infect us but we suspect it might be fairly low given how the disease is spreading.

There has been emerging evidence around 'viral load' of SARS-CoV-2. Viral load is the amount of virus found in a sample taken from a patient and indicates how well the virus is making copies in the infected person. If you have a high viral load, you are more likely to have more virus in your airways and so release when coughing to infect other people. A study indicated people with Covid19 have a high viral load just before and shortly after they start getting symptoms. This makes controlling the spread of the virus even harder as people are more likely to transmit the virus when they first get sick and up to 48 hours before symptoms start.

Some studies have reported that people who have more severe disease have higher viral loads (up to 60 times higher in severe cases than mild cases). A study just published from China looked at samples from 96 patients with Covid19 and found significantly higher viral loads in respiratory samples of patients with severe disease than those with mild disease. This would suggest that viral load can be used to predict how severe disease will be. But this isn't clear cut; another study from Lombardy didn't find a difference in viral load between those who had symptoms versus those who had not had any symptoms. All this evidence is based on observations of people who have the disease, rather than rigorous trials that expose people to escalating doses of virus and monitor for disease severity, and these trials are unlikely to happen for ethical reasons given the severe consequences of COVID-19 illness.

Stay at Home Message

WBC continues to support the Government's #StayHomeSaveLives message and have observed the guidance by closing all council offices to the public, with only a very few key workers attending at any one time. Where possible officers are working from home and where that is not possible some have been seconded to assist the Councils Covid response.

Parishes

Beech Hill

BEEC 5/1 and 5/2

I have been in contact with WBC's Rights Of Way team regarding signage that has appeared on this footpath and they have written to the owner requiring its removal.

Burghfield

The Collection

Following an email from a resident I have taken up an issue regarding possible safety issues with the siting of a kerb and a wooden barrier with WBC Highways.

Stratfield Mortimer

Lime 2 Bus

Along with my fellow Ward Members, I have been consulted by the WBC Transport team regarding the possible cessation of the twice-a-schoolday Lime 2 extension to St Mary's School / Mortimer Station whilst the Covid-19 pandemic continues.

Graham Bridgman

4 May 2020